

The Kearny Cottage
Catalpa Avenue, north of Raritan Boulevard
Perth Amboy, Middlesex County, New Jersey

HABS-NJ-637

HABS

NO

12 PERAM

3-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of New Jersey

Historic American Buildings Survey
Seymour Williams, F.A.I.A., District Officer
133 Central Avenue, Rahway, New Jersey

The Kearny Cottage
Catalpa Avenue, north of Raritan Boulevard
Perth Amboy, Middlesex County, New Jersey

Owners: City of Perth Amboy (Commodore Kearny Historical Society, occupant)

Date of Erection: In or soon after 1784

Architect: Unknown

Builder: Michael Kearny (1751-1791) original owner

Present Condition: Original, removed to new foundation on present site from southwest cor. High and Gordon Streets

Number of Stories: Two and one-half, and cellar

Materials of Construction:

Foundation - (modern brick) originally stone

Exterior walls - timber frame, clapboarded or shingled

Interior walls - plaster on frame

Chimney - brick, built into inside of wall

Roof - gable and rear leanto, wood shingled (new)

Historical Data:

In his will dated 25 April 1770 and proved 11 August 1775, Philip Kearny^(a) of Perth Amboy distributed

(a) Philip Kearny, a prominent lawyer, member of the Provincial Assembly, was born 18 May 1704, probably in Philadelphia, only child of Michael Kearny (from Ireland 1704 and settled in Perth Amboy 1720) by his second wife Elizabeth Brittin, and died 25 July 1775 in "the mansion house of his father on the Bluff at Perth Amboy" and was buried in a vault in St. Peter's Churchyard there. (Pedigree of Kearny, publ. in J.N. Jones, The History of St. Peter's Church in Perth Amboy, 1924, pp. 343-344). It is clear from the excerpts from the will of this Philip Kearny, quoted above, that in 1770 his house lot and the lots on the west side of High Street were different places. This evidence serves to correct the statement made in the reference cited, that he "took up residence in the Cottage Lot" after his second marriage (1745-1751).

his very large real estate holdings, including a devise to his wife Isabella of "All the land that was formerly her father's, and land adjoining thereto, which I bought since our marriage, and both being in Perth Amboy, on the west side of High Street..... If she disposes of none of the lots, then I give the same to my son Michael.....and I give the house and lots where I live.....to my said wife while my widow." (b)

Michael Kearny (c) was abovenamed in the will of his father, 1770, as residuary legatee of the land on the west side of High Street in Perth Amboy, but he died before his widowed mother. He was evidently the builder of the house (here surveyed) which, until its recent removal for preservation, stood on that land. The house has always been called by the family, "The Cottage", apparently for its modest dimensions as compared to those of the "mansion house" of his father (a). By order of General Washington, Michael Kearny was arrested for anti-American activities and was directed by the Provincial Congress of New Jersey in 1776 to remain at Trenton on parole. After his release, he departed for New York City where he became an officer in the Loyalists militia and was engaged as a searcher in the Superintendent-General's Department which had been established by the British army commander, Sir William Howe (d). After the evacuation of that city by the British troops in December 1783, Michael Kearny returned to Perth Amboy, where he managed to retrieve the High Street lot from his confiscated estate. These facts of his absence from the town between 1776 and 1784 establish the date of erection of "The Cottage" as in or soon after the latter year (e).

- (b) A full copy of the Will appears published in NJ Archives, XXXIV, 281-283
- (c) J.N. Jones, cited in note (a), pp. 348-349
- (d) L. Sabine, Biogr. Sketches of Loyalists of the American Revolution, 1864, 2 Vols., Vol. 2, p. 539.
- (e) and corrects the statement in W.J. Mills, Historic Houses of New Jersey (1902) p. 139, that it was built 1780.

Michael Kearny abovenamed, the builder of "The Cottage" here surveyed, was born in November 1751 in Perth Amboy eldest son of Philip Kearny and his second wife Isabella Hooper, a daughter of Robert Lettice Hooper of Perth Amboy (Chief Justice of the Province), and died 24 February 1791 in the same house. A recumbent marble slab inscribed with his name and the year 1791 marks his grave on the north side of St. Peter's Church. On 30 June 1774, he was married in Burlington, N. J., to Elizabeth, daughter of John Lawrence, Esq., of that city. She was born there 6 April 1754 and died in "The Cottage", Perth Amboy, 22 July 1802, famous for her poetry published under the pen name of "Madame Scribblerus".^(f) More important to the career of her son Lawrence Kearny was the fact that she was the 17 year older half sister to Commodore James Lawrence, U.S. Navy, (1781-1813) of "Don't give up the ship" fame^(c).

By his will of 23 February 1791, proved 8 July following, Michael Kearny abovesaid, of Perth Amboy, devised all his estate to his wife Elizabeth and their seven sons, John, Philip, Michael, Robert, James, Francis and Lawrence, equally divided. The widow was deceased by 29 March 1838, and also five of the brothers (intestate and without issue), whereupon their shares devolved upon the two survivors. On this date one of them, Philip Kearny of South Amboy Township conveyed to his brother Lawrence Kearny of Perth Amboy his share in the estate of their father and in those of the widow and deceased brothers. The deed describes one of the two tracts conveyed as containing some 14 acres on the west side of High Street in the city of Perth Amboy, "on which is the dwelling house called the Cottage".

(f) For an account of Elizabeth Lawrence Kearny, "Madame Scribblerus" see W. J. Mills, Historic Houses of N.J., 1902, pp. 139-150

Lawrence Kearny, (Captain, U.S. Navy, and later Commodore) was born in "The Cottage" (here considered) 30 November 1789, youngest of the nine sons of Michael and Elizabeth (Lawrence) Kearny abovesaid, came into full possession of The Cottage in 1838 as abovesaid, and died there 29 November 1868(g). The gravestone inscribed "In memory of Lawrence Kearny, U.S. Navy", with those dates, is found on the north side of St. Peter's Church, with those of his ancestors.

In a letter written 24 May 1842 on board the U.S.S. Constellation at Whampoa Reach, Captain Kearny, showing his usual concern for his family and the Cottage home in Perth Amboy, said "I may establish proper rules and regulations for the better government of the old cottage next spring..... on my hoisting my broad penant upon the old pear tree.....and there I shall conclude my long career of sea service". He had married on 2 January 1834 at Trinity Church, New York City, Josephine C. Hall. Her younger sisters, Louisa and Mary Hall, and their brother Edward were given a home in The Cottage and after her death there on 13 February 1849 (as the result of falling into the burning fireplace during a fit of epilepsy) these two kept the house for her husband and her three infant sons. From 1843 to 1851 and 1855-1857 Captain Kearny was relieved of sea duty and so was able to reside in his home, performing Court Martial duty for the Navy and serving as Mayor of the City 1848-1849. In a letter from Manila Bay he wrote: "Woe be to him who ventures upon the sacred soil of my old Cottage and draws a nail. Inch by inch shalt thy weather-beaten sides bend to the blast and crack and split in very contempt of modern storms, and in humbleness of thy attitude stand a monument of endurance. And thou shalt be for all future time the home of the exiled herd and geese." This remarkable apostrophe to his homestead as an enduring refuge was evidently inspired by his antipathy to progress in old Perth Amboy as he knew it, regulations for restraining cattle and fowl from the public square having been

(g) Record of Commissions of Lawrence Kearny in the U.S. Navy: - Midshipman 1807, Lieut. 1813, Commander 1825, Captain 1832, Retired List 1861, Commodore on Retired List 1867. (J.N. Jones, cited in note (a) pp. 353-354.)

established, and old estates cut for building lots^(h).

Commodore Lawrence Kearny died intestate on 29 November 1868, and the Cottage passed to his only surviving son James Lawrence Kearny. By a deed of 20 March 1874, Emily Kearny, of Perth Amboy, widow of Robert M. Kearny⁽ⁱ⁾, conveyed to James Lawrence Kearny of the same place her dower interest in the 14½ acre tract "Part of the lands whereof Lawrence Kearny lately of Perth Amboy died seized in 1868 and wherein he resided at the time of his death," describing it as having a 571 foot frontage on the west line of High Street and bounded south by the Brighton House^(j) property, north by Gordon Street, and west by the Middlesex Land Company.

James Lawrence Kearny, only one of the three children of Commodore Kearny to survive infancy, was born in the Cottage 19 April 1846, and died there 16 December 1921, the last of his line. He married on 26 January 1881 Margaret Ann Rowlett of Petersburg, Va., who pre-deceased him on 28 September 1898^(k). The will of "James Lawrence Kearny, childless widower, of the city of Perth Amboy", dated 29 November 1915 and proved 29 December 1921, devised all his estate to his cousin John Lawrence Boggs of Newark, requiring him to pay legacies to St. Peter's Church, the Perth Amboy Hospital, the Home for the Aged, and to several relatives.

J. Lawrence Boggs the devisee and executor named in the Will of his cousin James L. Kearny above cited, conveyed to Jacob P. Goldsmith and others by his deeds of 1st July 1922 the Cottage lot divided into three parcels, they agreeing thereby to "remove the said Kearny homestead to stand on the rear" of the northern third parcel of the lot, and "to be at least 100 feet from its present location."

(h) C.S. Alden, "Lawrence Kearny, Sailor Diplomat", publ. 1936, Princeton, N.J., pp. 216 and 222

(i) Robert M. Kearny, b. 17 Feb. 1781 in N.Y.C., d. there 26 Sept. 1816, bur. in Trinity Chyd., mar. Emily Jones who d. s. p. (J.N. Jones, cited in note(a) p. 352.)

(j) The so-called Govr. Wm. Franklin Palace, later The Brighton Hotel, surveyed by H.A.B.S. as NJ-341

(k) An account of James L. Kearny appears in J.N. Jones, cited in note (a), pp. 355-356

But this agreement was waived by a quitclaim dated 7 April 1927 made between those several grantees, and the Cottage was in danger of demolition.

At the instance of Mr. Harold E. Pickersgill, a magistrate of Perth Amboy, the house was moved in 1935 at his expense to the park and conveyed to the City. The Commissioner then had proper foundations prepared for the house and fitted it with steam heat, and the Commodore Kearny Historical Society, founded by Mr. Pickersgill in the interests of preserving this Kearny Cottage, then became custodians.

Bibliography:

Report on search of title in the Land and Probate records of Middlesex County by Thomas J. Riley, H.A.B.S. abstractor, received 27 June 1940

Lewis D. Cook

Supervising Historian

Approved:

Seymour Williams

SEYMOUR WILLIAMS, F.A.I.A.
District Officer